



TRANSITION GAGS

by Ruba Katrib



Antoine Catala: *(::)(::)*
(*band aid*), 2014,
plastic coated foam,
motor, steel, plastic and
electronics, 11 by 48 by
12 inches. Courtesy 47
Canal, New York.
Photo Andy Keate.



A dumb thud echoed throughout Gelitin's "The Fall Show" at New York's Greene Naftali gallery in 2012, as visitors stepped on levers on pedestals that sent sculptures flying to the floor. Broken, the works remained there until someone put them back. The mechanisms were designed to make a mess.

In Judith Hopf's video *Some End of Things: The Conception of Youth* (2011), a chicken lays an egg. The scene then shifts to a man in an egg costume walking through an underpass and attempting to enter the rectangular doors of a glass-and-steel building, a modernist machine for living. Why did the chicken cross the road? His organic form doesn't fit this right-angled, high-tech world.

Over the last two years Antoine Catala has created three-dimensional emoticons, broken hearts and smiles. Conspicuously plugged in, they are brought to a semblance of life by electricity. The bulky sculptures toil on the floor to approximate expression, ploddingly rotating as their smiles turn to frowns.

What do these works have in common? They're art with punch lines conveyed through movement. They use the logic of slapstick. They speak to the comical frustrations of interacting with objects and spaces; they address the awkwardness of physical limits and the fear of violent collisions between bodies and things.

Slapstick emerged around the turn of the 20th century as a radically new way of seeing the body, a body newly impacted by machines. Silent cinema's spread in the 1910s and '20s contributed to the proliferation of humor in everyday life and an evolution of comedy's structure, which came to emphasize quick movements and physical communication.

Slapstick makes us laugh because machines are foreign. Their proximity to—or confusion with—the body seems humorously perverse. Philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in 1900 that humor is inherent to the mechanical, that the "illusion of life" in inanimate things and "mechanical arrangements" found in animate beings are

always funny.¹ When bodies and machines clash, slapstick lets us blunder with a smile.

Slapstick originally referred to a device that vaudeville comedians used to pummel each other on stage, to exaggeratedly loud effect.² Even without the stick, slapstick carries a promise of violence, and like any violent act it can heighten or release tension. We in the audience laugh because we can relate, while feeling relief that we are only looking.

“American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies,”

Walter Benjamin wrote in 1935, as he considered cinema’s technological impact on art and culture in its first decades. He saw new forms of mass media as a way to relieve anxiety: “Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis.”³

The movement generated by film led to a new type of humor, as gags and the nonverbal punch lines of slapstick came to define the silent-movie era. Benjamin referred to the “new fields of action” and the “newly built house” that were created through film—a realm where the comedian reigned. Meanwhile, as media theorist Henry Jenkins chronicles in his history of early cinematic comedy, the bourgeoisie balked at the sort of laughter that infected the rising mainstream culture. “The laughing impulse, when unchecked, has taken on ugly and deadly forms,” influential British child psychologist James Sully warned in “An Essay on Laughter” (1902). “Society is right in her intuitive feeling that an unbridled laughter threatens her order and her laws.”⁴

Jenkins argues that the New Humor, as it was called, exemplified changing American lifestyles and demographics, and developed in response to the Machine Age. Jokes became more efficient to fit the new formats of popular media—from cinema to comic strips—and to match the fast pace of urban life.⁵ Popular humor had previously been disseminated primarily through music halls, vaudeville acts and circuses, but audiences were shifting gears to the goofy speed of bodies on-screen. People leapt, tripped and stumbled into a new era guided by slapstick cinema.

As comedy’s frequency suddenly surged in magazines and theater productions, along with film, in the first decades of the 20th century, anxieties about industrialization, urbanization, immigration, unionization, women’s suffrage and generational conflicts were manifested as unease about the new humor. The head had purportedly ruled in the Victorian era, dominating the vulgar body, but the balance of power seemed askew. “Reckless jokes seemed to throw more fuel onto the fires of change,” writes Jenkins. “The image of a loss of bodily control in laughter seemed to symbolize for these writers the loss of social control and the decline of their cultural dominance.” Critics warned in earnest that people could literally laugh themselves to death, or at least to the mental asylum. (Jenkins lists the titles of articles in publications such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper’s Weekly* cautioning against the potentially harmful results of too much joking: “The Plague of Jocularly,” “A Plea for Seriousness” and “Serious Results of the Recent Humor.”)⁶

Film fundamentally changed entertainment by appealing to a wide range of pocketbooks and cultures, from the remaining robber barons of the Gilded Age to laborers. Immigrant folk traditions fed into nascent popular culture, bringing slapstick antics and the cheap gags of vaudeville and cabaret into the equally accessible—but far more novel and alluring—site of the cinemas.⁷ Audiences thrilled to the distortions of film, where reality was reconfigured by the camera's eye and the splices of the editing table.

The New Humor in America had a kindred spirit in Europe's satirical and antiauthoritarian art of the fin de siècle, such as Alfred Jarry's groundbreaking play *Ubu Roi* (1896). Featuring a corrupt, grotesque and infantile king, the play infamously sparked a largely middle-class audience to riot at its premiere. Jarry influenced the strain of modernism that sought to shock the bourgeoisie with absurdity and profanity. Dada emerged in the wake of Jarry's play. Duchamp presented a urinal as art and vandalized Mona Lisa with a dirty phrase. Picabia painted young American girls as spark plugs, completely merging the body with a machine.

Rene Clair's early sketch comedy film *Entr'acte* (1924) captured the attitudes of the time in its jumble of comic sequences. Clair jumps from a bearded ballerina to a paper boat floating above Paris to Man Ray and Duchamp playing chess—a game spoiled by a shooting stream of water. As film historian Tom Gunning has explained, audiences are drawn to the gag—such as the water hose that sprays Duchamp in *Entr'acte*—because of a desire to see the payoff of whatever situation the gag sets up, regardless of the consequences.⁸

The avant-garde actively absorbed the increasingly prevalent crude humor popularized by film. Their endeavors culminated with the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938 in Paris. The show provoked laughs by arranging absurdist works in immersive installations that visitors traversed while carrying flashlights. Bags of coal defied gravity, seeming to float at the ceiling, and paintings were placed on revolving doors. The Surrealists wanted to induce wonder in their audiences by creating funny obstacles and other devices that confounded physical logic.

As the Surrealists explored slapstick and crass jokes in the interwar period, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and other silent film stars dominated the box office with gags involving mechanical violence. (Keaton's *The Cameraman*, 1928, for example, featured a range of frustrating attempts at mastering a new film camera, with anything and everything going wrong.) In a typical evening there, live action films would alternate with animated shorts, effectively doubling the choppy structure of silent comedy. Entertainment came as a succession of interruptions, as jolting as the gags onscreen.

The animated characters of the Fleischer and Disney studios—the silent actors' cartoon counterparts on the silver screen—upped the ante for slapstick by taking their antics beyond the laws of physics. The lines separating human, animal and machine became blurred. "In Shakespeare's tragedies, people change. In Shakespeare's comedies the characters are ceaselessly transfigured, changing costumes or

being physically transfigured through magic,” wrote Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet director and film theorist. “With Disney, this all overlaps.”⁹ The transformative power of animation was so significant that Chaplin worried cartoons would put him out of business; they contorted freely and never missed a beat.¹⁰

In 1938, well into the time of talkies, Chaplin released *Modern Times*. A last gasp of the now-old New Humor, it was his final appearance as the tramp and a swan song for the silent era. In the film, Chaplin moves too fast and gets stuck in the factory line he is working on, trapped on the cogs of a wheel. As a test subject for an invasive feeding machine being sold to his employer, he switches between productive worker and total slacker. The contraption holds up a corncob to Chaplin’s mouth and wipes his face, for a more efficient lunch break. But the machine goes out of control, and the corncob violently and rapidly rotates in Chaplin’s mouth as the salesman desperately attempts to reconfigure the settings. The boss shakes his head; he won’t be buying the lunch machine. Later, Chaplin sneaks a smoke in the bathroom until, in one of the film’s few instances of sound, his boss appears on a large screen and yells, “Get back to work!”

Henry Ford had instituted the assembly line in 1913, and Chaplin was satirizing a work situation that was already familiar. But the new cinematic technologies of sound and color eschewed by Chaplin coincided with increased standardization at the big studios, bringing something like Fordism to Hollywood. Along the way, the quality of laughter changed. The scrappy, crude and bizarre—all distinctive features of silent comedy—gave way to verbal wit and realism in the talkies. And as the running times of films got longer, audiences were no longer jolted by the interruptions of switching reels as they were in the ’20s. They were fully absorbed.

Walt Disney, through his transition from avant-garde pioneer to corporate mogul, led the charge into the 1930s by phasing out slapstick gags. The rough drawings of his early animations, so economical in their amusement, turned into elaborate artistry. The squiggly lines that had composed Mickey Mouse’s rodent features evolved into a more anthropomorphic and sympathetic character; his snout shrank to a snub nose on a rounded face. Disney wanted his audience to forget they were watching cartoons; as production became more and more standardized, Disney wrote memos calling for more “personality in the animations.”¹¹ Whatever individuality the studio’s animators had previously been able to express was subordinated to that of the characters they now mechanically produced.

Disney presented his new vision for cartoons in the first-ever feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The comedy was cute, and the characters, while unbelievable as birds doing housekeeping might be, were sympathetic. The narrative was engrossing, not disruptive. The movie marked animation’s shift from the stupid to the charming, a transition aided by the sophistication of new film technology. Further, the storyline focused on a fascist notion of racial purity; the Evil Queen wonders: “Who is the fairest

of them all?" The only one in *Snow White* who retains the magic of bodily transformation possessed by Disney's early characters, the Queen struck terror in audiences. All the other magic in *Snow White* is soothingly smoothed by realistic representation, as seamless as the lines that comprise the drawings on the cel. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer criticized the direction that Disney took. "Cartoons and stunt films were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism," the two wrote in 1944. "They allowed justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life. Today they merely confirm the victory of technological reason over truth."¹²

The first of many German fairy tales that Disney would adapt for the big screen, *Snow White* signaled a fascination with untarnished innocence that seemed to repent for earlier sins. In 1931, a Nazi journal lambasted Mickey Mouse as a symbol of American immigrants and Jews, and condemned Disney for propagating "vile and dirty vermin."¹³ But in 1938 Disney was the only Hollywood figure to receive Leni Riefenstahl on her trip to California. "He has the German feeling," Riefenstahl said.¹⁴

Paul McCarthy's *WS* (2013) at New York's Park Avenue Armory revisited the psychosocial implications of Disney's *Snow White*. A multi-channel video narrates White Snow's journey with more than seven hours of footage. Screens were distributed around the massive set where the video was shot: a trashed California ranch house and fantastical forest, now abandoned by the characters. On the screens, bodies flop around, slip in gunk and throw things at each other, creating an epic mess. Dwarfs knock each other on the head repeatedly, recalling the Three Stooges, and White Snow incites an extreme food fight that goes on for hours. Though set in an America of recent memory, *WS* employs a grotesque humor more primal than Disney's *Steamboat Willie* or Chaplin's slapstick. Its psychosexual depth harks back to the scatological laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin described in his study of medieval folklore and the carnivalesque. The character's bodies are pliable, plastic in flexibility and materiality. The characters certainly laugh maniacally, but it's unclear whether the audience is meant to join them. *WS* lowers its viewers a little further into the void that laughter conceals.

To soil the sexual and racial purity of *Snow White*, McCarthy sets off a return of the repressed that releases a wholly new set of problems, cascading forth as chaotically as the disjointed narrative unfolds on the multiple looped projections. While Disney is turned into the bad Nazi daddy he may have actually been, White Snow becomes a libidinous young woman who actively encourages and participates in various perversions with the seven dwarfs. Through *Snow White*, Disney aimed to target that "kind, clean, unspoiled spot deep down in all of us."¹⁵ In McCarthy's version, that spot is drenched in condiments and sex.

McCarthy's installation makes the body a plaything—a mix of organic and inorganic stuff, animate and inanimate qualities. White Snow, as a character, appears in many forms: a life-size cast sculpture laid out in a coffin; a naked plastic body sprawled on the

stained living room floor (a nod to Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*); an actress in the sadomasochistic gross-out scenes of the video; and, finally, a mass-produced toy available in the pop-up gift shop at the front of the Armory. Just as the body of the actress seems to lose control, caught in a pornographic oscillation between pleasure and pain, the multifarious body of the character can't find a single form. She is real, she is imaginary, she is object, and she is instigator. But are we in her fantasy or is she in ours? We witness humiliation and power, the laughter and wonder of a childlike jouissance and the dark edges of perversion in play. Disney may have covered up slapstick with realism in animation, but in stripping it away, McCarthy also takes away modernity's mechanical casings—revealing the spitting, puking, lascivious animal at the base of the human psyche, whose desires have outwardly conformed to today's commodified world.

Slapstick's target is technology, wrote Benjamin; it "is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror."¹⁶ The human body, articulated as material that butts into and sometimes merges with objects, can provoke awkward interactions, to say the least. Humor, although at times ambivalent, flickers between critique and enjoyment, arising from a body's frustrated interface with the world.

Situations gone wrong can produce a particular terror as well as childish amusement. Sometimes we fear and desire the instability of our bodies, as in *WS*. Other times, objects continuously malfunction like Gelitin's did, becoming impossible to put back together. Often we are physically constricted by our mechanically produced world, as in Judith Hopf's video. A hunk of plastic fails to express feeling, as in Antoine Catala's kinetic sculpture, but it can still bring a smile to a human face. Our world is populated by alien things that function and malfunction beyond our comprehension. We're helpless. But caught in laughter's momentary paralysis, we might find some relief.

1. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, Rockville, Md., Wildside Press, 2008, p. 36.

2. Tom Gunning discusses the machinelike quality of the slapstick as a stick that produced an overly loud and excessively "fake" violent effect. For more detailed discussion, see "Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick," in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 140-41.

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone and Howard Eiland, in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 2008, p. 38.

4. James Sullu, quoted in Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 42.

5. Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, p. 37.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.
7. For documentation of this process, see Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013, pp. 109-10.
8. Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 91.
9. Sergei Eisenstein, *Sergei Eisenstein: DISNEY*, trans. Dustin Condren, ed. Oksana Bulgakowa and Dietmar Hochmuth, Berlin, Potemkin Press, 2012, p. 32.
10. Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avante-Garde*, London, Verso, 2004, pp. 15-16.
11. Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 76.
12. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 110.
13. Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p. 80.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-28. Leslie makes an interesting historical analysis of the various complex alignments and rifts between Disney and the Nazis in her chapter "Leni and Walt: Deutsche-Amerikanische Freundschaft," pp. 123-57. After the U.S. declared war on Germany, Disney made several anti-Nazi propaganda cartoons, including *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1942), starring Donald Duck, which won an Academy Award for best animated short.
15. Walt Disney, quoted in Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p. 150.
16. Walter Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," in *The Work of Art*, pp. 329-30.

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